

Believing Begins the Adventure.
Friendship Takes them Home.

Disney The Never Girls



the Space between

by Kiki Thorpe
illustrated by Jana Christy

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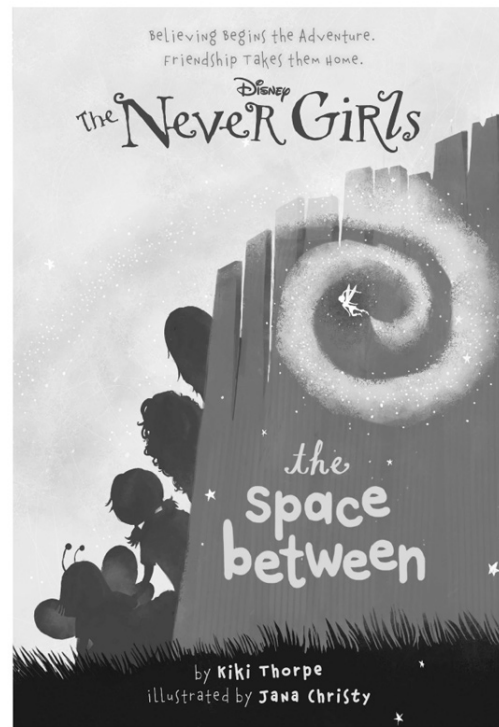
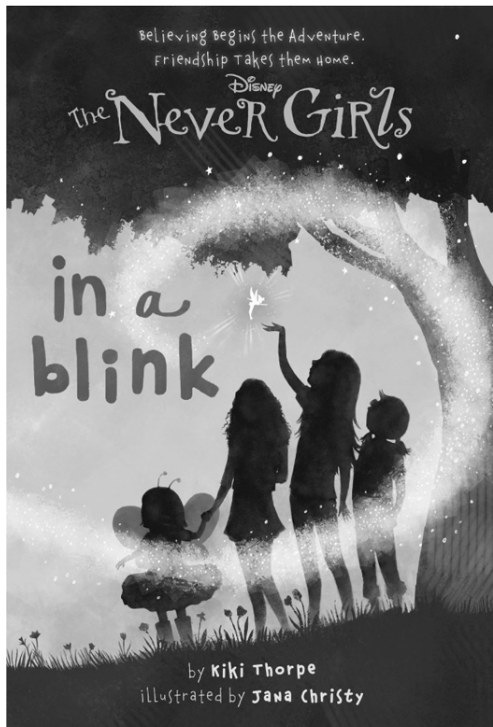
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Read all of Kate, Mia, Lainey, and Gabby's adventures!



Disney
The Never Girls



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A STEPPING STONE BOOK™

RANDOM HOUSE  NEW YORK

The publisher would like to thank Caroline Egan for her artistic vision.

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For Aida —K.T.

For Janee —J.C.

Never Land

Far away from the world we know, on the distant seas of dreams, lies an island called Never Land. It is a place full of magic, where mermaids sing, fairies play, and children never grow up. Adventures happen every day, and anything is possible.

There are two ways to reach Never Land. One is to find the island yourself. The other is for it to find you. Finding Never Land on your own takes a lot of luck and a pinch of fairy dust. Even then, you will only find the island if it wants to be found.

Every once in a while, Never Land drifts close to our world ... so close a fairy's laugh slips through. And every once in an even longer while, Never Land opens its doors to a special few. Believing in magic and fairies from the bottom of your heart can make the extraordinary happen. If you suddenly hear tiny bells or feel a sea breeze where there is no sea, pay careful attention. Never Land may be close by. You could find yourself there in the blink of an eye.

One day, four special girls came to Never Land
in just this way. This is their story.

Never Land



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Chapter 1

Lainey Winters was soaring.

For a brief moment, her heart seemed to stop. The ground fell away, and she rose up, up, up ... and over the fallen log.

An instant later, she touched down again, bounding through the forest on the back of a doe. Trees flashed by in a blur of green. Lainey dug her hands deeper into the doe's fur. She held on tight as they darted around bushes and flew over stones.

Leaves crashed above. Lainey looked up and saw a squirrel racing through the trees. A tiny fairy sat on its back, her long brown braid swinging behind her. The squirrel leaped from branch to branch, keeping pace with the doe.

Lainey leaned forward, urging her doe on. The fairy did the same.



Ahead was a small clearing. In its center stood a tall maple tree, bigger than any other tree in the forest. From a distance, its branches seemed to sparkle and move. This was due to the many fairies who hummed around it like bees around a honeycomb. The maple was called the Home Tree, and it was the heart of Pixie Hollow, the Never fairies' world.

Lainey steered the doe toward the Home Tree. Even without looking up, she could sense the fairy on the squirrel following above.

A few feet from the tree, the squirrel shot past Lainey. It landed on a branch and came to a stop just as Lainey and the doe pulled up at the Home Tree's roots.

Lainey laughed. "You beat me again, Fawn!" she called to the fairy on the squirrel.

"I wouldn't be much of an animal-talent fairy if I couldn't win a race against a Clumsy, would I?" Fawn replied, smiling.

Lainey slid off the doe's back, pushing the big glasses she wore up her nose. She didn't care about winning or losing. For her, the joy was in riding the deer, feeling it turn when she wanted to turn, knowing when it would leap. In her real life, the one where she went to school and lived with her parents, Lainey had never even had a pet, not so much as a goldfish. But here in Never Land, she'd played hide-and-seek with wild hares. She'd listened to the songs of loons. She'd cradled baby hedgehogs in her hand. Things she'd never dreamed possible seemed to happen every day.

As Lainey patted the deer's back, Fawn flew down and landed on its head. She whispered something in the doe's ear. The doe ducked its head once, as if nodding. Then it turned and bounded away into the forest.

“What did you say?” Lainey asked.

“I told her next time I’d ride with her, and you could ride the squirrel,” Fawn joked.

“I want to learn to do that,” Lainey said.

Fawn raised her eyebrows. “Ride a squirrel? Don’t you think you’re a bit too big?”

Lainey giggled. “No, I want to learn how to speak Deer.”

“You have to wriggle before you can hop,” Fawn replied.

“I have to do what?” asked Lainey, confused.

“It’s an animal-fairy saying,” Fawn explained. “It means you have to start slowly. Talking to deer is tricky. They can be pretty snooty about accents. Let’s hear how your Mouse is coming along.”

Furrowing her brow, Lainey squeaked, “Eeee-eee!”

Fawn had been teaching Lainey how to speak the language of mice. So far, Lainey had only learned one squeak. Loosely translated, it meant “Are your whiskers well?”

Two dairy mice that were sniffing around nearby lifted their heads to look at Lainey.

“Not bad,” said Fawn, nodding. “Now let’s hear you call that chickadee.” She pointed to a plump little bird sitting on a branch.

“But I don’t know Chickadee!” Lainey protested.

“It’s easy,” said Fawn. “Just go like this.” Pursing her lips, Fawn let out a whistle that sounded like *tseedle dee tseedle dee deet*. “You try.”

Lainey did her best to copy Fawn. She pursed her lips and



whistled. But all that came out was a sad *feewp!*

To her surprise, the chickadee flew over and landed on her finger.

“How did I do that?” Lainey asked. Then she noticed Fawn laughing. “Wait a second. *You* called him over, didn’t you?”

“So what if I did?” Fawn said with an impish grin. “He wouldn’t have come if he didn’t want to. Animals like you, Lainey. I’d say you’re becoming a real animal-talent Clumsy.”

Lainey blushed.

Fawn pulled a sunflower seed from her pocket. She held it out to the chickadee, who took it in his beak and flew away.

“Well, I’m hungry,” Fawn said. “Want to see what the baking-talent fairies have whipped up today?”

Lainey shook her head. “I’m going to go find the other girls. See you later?”

“Sure,” said Fawn. “I think there’s a nest of robin’s eggs that need a hand with hatching. Maybe you can help me.” With a wave, she flew off.

Lainey started across the meadow, her spirits high. Fawn’s compliment still rang in her ears. *A real animal-talent Clumsy*. Lainey couldn’t help smiling every time she thought about it.

Maybe it’s true, Lainey thought. *Maybe I really do have animal talent*.

Before coming to Pixie Hollow, Lainey had never felt particularly special. She wasn’t beautiful like her friend Mia, or brave like her friend Kate. She wasn’t good at sports, and she didn’t get the best grades in school. In fact, Lainey hadn’t been sure she was good at anything at all.

But that had changed when she'd started spending time with the animal-talent fairies. Lainey was learning how to listen to animals and how to watch them. And she had a knack for it!

A real animal-talent Clumsy.

A rustling noise above her made Lainey look up. She paused to watch a flock of flamingos pass. She loved seeing the pale pink birds against the brilliant blue of the sky. The flamingos had been one of the very first creatures she'd seen in Never Land, and she never tired of watching them.

Lainey continued across the meadow and made her way to Havendish Stream. There she found Kate, Mia, and Gabby, her friends who had come to Never Land with her. They were sailing boats with the water-talent fairies. Tiny fairies in red, gold, and green leaf-boats drifted around on the current while the girls blew wind into their sails.



The freckled, curly-haired fairy named Prilla was there, too. Prilla was the reason the girls had come to Never Land. She had a talent unlike any other in Pixie Hollow. She could travel to the world of humans and back again just by blinking. One day, she'd traveled to Mia and Gabby's backyard and accidentally brought the four girls back to Pixie Hollow with her.

Prilla had discovered that she couldn't blink the girls back home, so the fairies of Pixie Hollow had taken them in. That had been days ago—or was it weeks? Lainey wasn't sure. Time passed strangely in Never Land, where every day was sunny and no one ever grew up or grew old.

“Hi, Lainey,” Mia said. “Where have you been?”

“I was riding in the woods with Fawn,” Lainey said.

Kate stood, brushing off the knees of her jeans. “We’re thinking about going to Skull Rock, just to see what it’s like,” she told Lainey. Kate had made it her mission to explore every corner of Never Land.

“Prilla says we might see a mermaid there!” Gabby chimed in excitedly. Gabby was only five, but she was every bit as adventurous as the other girls.

“We’re not going for long,” Mia added. “There’s a fairy dance tonight, and I want to make sure we’re back in time. The weaving-talent fairies are going to braid jasmine into my hair!”

“Want to come?” Kate asked Lainey.

Lainey hesitated. She wanted to go with her friends, but she also wanted to watch chicks hatching with Fawn. There were so many fun things happening in Never Land. Sometimes it was hard to decide what to do first.

Just then, they spotted a fairy flying toward them. As she came closer, the girls saw it was Skye. The fairy’s rose-petal cap was crooked on her head, and she seemed to be out of breath.

“I’ve been looking all over for you girls!” she said with a gasp. “It’s time!”

“Time for what?” asked Kate.

“Never Land is on the move again,” Skye replied.

The girls looked at each other in dismay. They knew what that meant. It was time for them to go home.



Chapter 2

Skye, the seeing-talent fairy, was the one who had figured out how the girls had come to Never Land. She'd also figured out why they couldn't return home again.

As Skye had explained it, Never Land was unlike other islands. It drifted on the seas of children's dreams, moving wherever it wished. One day, it had drifted close to the world of Clumsies, so close that the tiniest bit of magic had pulled four unsuspecting girls to its shores. Kate, Mia, Lainey, and Gabby had always believed in fairies, but their wildest dreams came true when they arrived there on Prilla's blink.

Then the island had drifted away again—and the four girls had been stranded.

But now Never Land was close to the girls' world again. "I saw the mainland with my own eyes," Skye told the girls. "Prilla can blink you back home again—right away! But you must hurry!"

"But what about Skull Rock?" said Kate.

"And the mermaid?" said Gabby.

"And the fairy dance?" said Mia.

“And the robin chicks?” said Lainey.

“If you don’t go now, you might never make it back. Who knows when Never Land will be this close to your world again?” Skye said.

The girls had always known this day would come. They just hadn’t thought it would come so soon. Not one of them wanted to leave, but if they didn’t, they might never see their families again.

So they would have to say good-bye—to the flower-filled meadow and burbling Havendish Stream, to the magnificent Home Tree and all the kind, lovely fairies who lived there. *And it isn’t just a “see-you-later” good-bye*, Lainey thought. *It is really and truly farewell.* Children who left Never Land never came back, the fairy Tinker Bell had told them. They grew up too quickly and forgot about it.

With heavy hearts, the four girls went to their willow-tree room to pack.

Sunlight shone through the willow’s branches as they entered, casting a jade-green glow over the room. Lainey looked at the hammocks where they’d slept, the firefly lanterns hanging from the tree limbs, the moss carpet on the ground.

“There isn’t anything to pack,” she realized. They’d come to Pixie Hollow with nothing but the clothes they had on.

“I want to take *something* home with me,” Mia said. She picked up a tiny folding fan that a fairy had left behind. The fan was made from daisy petals held together with pine needles. Mia put it in her pocket.

Kate found an itty-bitty kaleidoscope that a pots-and-pans fairy had cobbled together from bits of scrap metal. A water-talent fairy had cast the lens from a single drop of dew. Gabby chose a daisy garland that the garden-talent fairies had woven. She placed it on her head like a crown.

“It’ll wilt, you know,” Mia warned her little sister.



“I don’t care,” Gabby said, sticking out her lip.

Lainey looked around for a souvenir of her own. She considered her licorice-twigg toothbrush or one of the firefly lanterns, but neither seemed right. She wished she could take a pet home with her—her doe, maybe, or one of the livelier squirrels. But of course, she knew

the animals belonged in Never Land. Besides, her mother would never allow it—her mother didn't even like goldfish.

At last she picked up a mouse-herder's lasso. It was made of braided Never grass. Lainey slipped it over her wrist like a bracelet, pulling the end tight. She remembered the day Fawn had used it to lasso a wayward dairy mouse.

Thinking of that reminded Lainey of her lesson earlier that day. *I'll never learn how to speak Deer now.* The thought filled Lainey with sadness.

Prilla appeared in the doorway of the willow room. Her bright, open face was unusually glum. "Skye says you must hurry. There isn't much time."

Taking one last look around their room, the girls followed Prilla out the door.

Beneath a hawthorn tree on the far side of Pixie Hollow was a ring of mushrooms. This was the fairy circle, where Pixie Hollow's magic was strongest. When Lainey and her friends got there, they were surprised to see all the fairies gathered together. Animal fairies, fast-flying fairies, water fairies, light fairies, garden fairies, harvest fairies, baking fairies, dressmaking fairies, art fairies, storytelling fairies, and dozens more. Fairies from every talent had come to see the girls off.

Clarion, queen of the Never fairies, stood at the head of the fairy circle. Her wings were folded solemnly behind her in honor of the sad moment. She nodded to the girls to step inside the circle.

"The fairies have a parting gift for you," the queen said. At her cue, Terence, a dust-talent sparrow man, flew forward. He held out a velvet sack no bigger than a peach pit.



“It’s a bit of fairy dust,” the queen explained. “Just one pinch for each of you. Perhaps one day you can use it to find your way back to Pixie Hollow.”

“How will we know the way?” Kate wondered. “Is there a map?”

The queen spread her hands. “I can’t say for sure. Never Land drifts about on the waves, always moving. But some say that to get here from the mainland you should look for the Second Star to the Right and fly straight on till morning.”

Thanking the queen, Kate took the bag of dust from Terence and put it in her pocket.

Several fairies and sparrow men came forward then to say special good-byes to the girls. Lainey searched the crowd for Fawn, but she didn’t see her friend anywhere.

At last, Skye entered the circle. “You must go now,” she told Prilla and the girls. “Never Land is on the move again. Soon it will be too late.”

Kate, Lainey, Mia, and Gabby held hands. Prilla landed in Gabby’s open palm.

“Fly sa—” the queen started to say as Prilla blinked.

In that moment, all of Pixie Hollow winked out. The trees, the flowers, the sky, the fairy circle, and the fairies themselves—everything vanished. The rest of Queen Clarion’s words were lost.



An instant later, the girls found themselves in Mia and Gabby’s backyard. They looked around at the tall wooden fence, the neatly mowed lawn, and the tidy rows of petunias in the flower bed.

A soccer ball sat nearby in the grass. Lainey picked it up, turning it over in her hands. They'd been playing a game with the ball just before they blinked to Never Land. That seemed like a lifetime ago. Like something she'd dreamed.

"Are we really home?" asked Gabby.

Kate pinched herself. "I think so," she said, but she didn't sound certain.

They heard a high bell-like noise, like the tinkle of a fairy's laugh. All the girls turned toward the sound, but it was only Mia's cat, Bingo. The bells on Bingo's collar jingled as he ran toward them.

Mia scooped the cat up in her arms. She buried her face in his fur. "Oh, Bingo! I missed you!"

"*Mrow*," Bingo complained as Mia squeezed him tightly. He wriggled out of her arms and wandered off to chase grasshoppers.

Just then, the back door to the house opened. "Gabby, are you out here?" called a familiar voice.

"Mami!" Gabby squealed. She went running toward her mother, her curls bouncing and her fairy wings flapping on her back.

Mia turned to Lainey and Kate with wide eyes. "What am I going to tell her?" she whispered. "We've been gone for *days*!"

"Remember what Prilla taught us about a blink," Lainey reminded her. "When she travels on a blink, time moves differently."

"Let's hope it's true." Kate looked worried. "Otherwise, we're all going to be in for it."



“Do you think it’s the same if we fly to Never Land?” Lainey wondered. “Does time stop the same way?”

“Speaking of that,” Mia said, “what about the fairy dust? Shouldn’t we put it somewhere safe?”

“It’s plenty safe. I’ve got it right here,” Kate said, patting her pocket.

An odd look flashed across her face. Kate dug her hand into her pocket. Then she checked her other pocket. She turned both pockets inside out.

Mia frowned. “Kate, that’s not funny. Quit messing around.”

“I’m not joking,” Kate said in a choked voice. “The fairy dust—it’s gone!”



Chapter 3

Fawn sat alone in the Home Tree courtyard, twirling the end of her braid between her fingers. Lainey, Mia, Kate, and Gabby had gone to the fairy circle—any moment now, they’d be on their way back to their real homes. Fawn knew she should see them off. But she couldn’t bring herself to go.

Fawn hated good-byes. As a Never fairy, she rarely had to say them. Fairies hardly ever left Pixie Hollow, and when they did it was never for long. As for her animal friends, Fawn could see them whenever she wanted, because the creatures of Never Land never grew old.

But now her new Clumsy friends were gone, and she hadn’t said so much as “fly safely.” Not even to Lainey, whom Fawn liked especially. Fawn felt tears pricking at the backs of her eyes.

“You knew this day would come,” she scolded herself. “There’s no sense crying over it.”

At last, Fawn got to her feet. But instead of flying to the fairy circle, she flew in the opposite direction, toward the dairy barn. When Fawn’s

spirits were low, she liked to visit the dairy mice. She was always happiest around animals.

As Fawn pulled open the heavy door, the mice lifted their heads in greeting.

“How are you, Thistledown? Feeling well, Cloverseed?” she asked as she walked among them. The mice came forward to snuffle her pockets, the bells around their necks chiming faintly. Fawn scratched them behind their ears.

“Where’s Milkweed?” she wondered, noticing an empty stall.

The mice only blinked in reply. Fawn understood mice well enough to know that not one of them had noticed Milkweed was missing until now. Mice could be self-centered that way.

“I reckon he’s wandered off,” she said. “Probably raiding Rosetta’s garden for seeds again.” Milkweed was a good name for the missing mouse because, like a weed, he was always turning up where he wasn’t wanted. “I’ll have to go find him.”

Fawn was glad to have something to do to take her mind off the girls. Leaving the dairy barn, she headed outside, calling for Milkweed in soft squeaks. “Milkweed! Where are you, you little fur ball?”

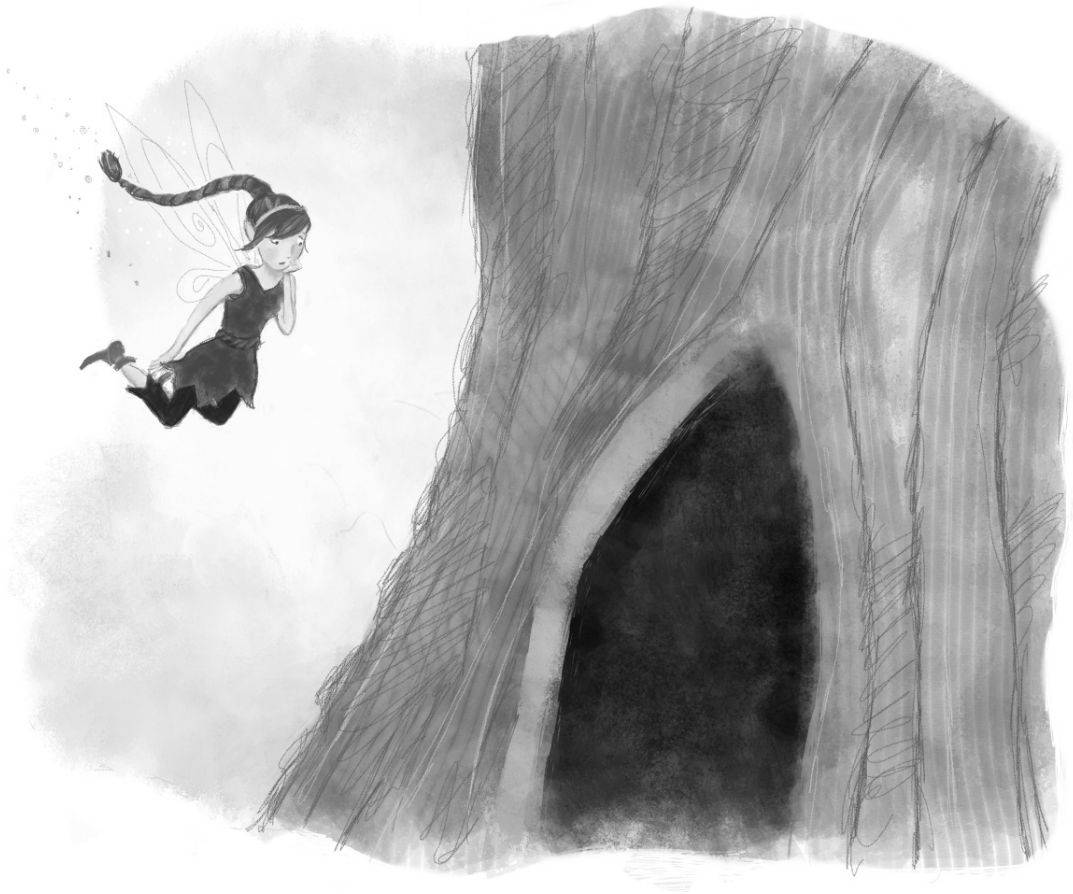
Fawn looked in Rosetta’s garden, but she didn’t see Milkweed there. She tried other gardens, then circled Pixie Hollow, flying in wider and wider loops.

When she came to Havendish Stream, she paused. Beyond was the great forest of Never Land. Fawn didn’t think the little mouse could have crossed the stream on his own.

She was about to turn back when her eyes fell on the stream bank. There in the mud, clear as day, was a mouse’s footprint.

Fawn sighed. “Oh, bugs and beetles. What are you up to now, Milkweed?”

She flew across the stream and came to a stop in front of a massive fig tree. It was so large that it looked like several trees grown together. At the base of the tree was a hollow she had never noticed before. To Fawn, the hole seemed as big as a cave.



Were Fawn’s ears playing tricks on her or did she hear a bell? She listened carefully. Yes, there it was—a faint jingling. It seemed to be coming from inside the fig tree.

She peered cautiously into the hollow. Fawn wasn’t afraid of most animals. She’d talked her way out of tight spots with snakes, badgers, even an owl. Still, she wasn’t foolish enough to walk blindly into a predator’s nest.

“Helloooooo?” Fawn called into the darkness. Silence greeted her.

Taking a deep breath, Fawn flew into the tree.

Like all fairies, Fawn glowed. But her glow only allowed her to see a couple of inches in front of her. She flew slowly, shivering as she brushed against cobwebs.

Fawn could no longer hear the bell. “Milkweed?” she called.

Just then, Fawn saw light ahead. But how could that be? Wasn’t the mouth of the hollow behind her? Had she gotten turned around? *Fawn, you doodlehead*, she said to herself. *You’ve been flying in a circle!*

If Milkweed had ever been inside the hollow tree, he wasn’t anymore, Fawn decided. She headed toward the opening.

Sunshine flooded her eyes. Fawn stopped, blinking in surprise at the strange landscape before her.

A sea of green grass stretched below her feet. But what odd grass! Every blade had been snipped off at the exact same height. Fawn flew down close to examine the grass, trying to imagine what creature could have cut it just so. *Why*, she thought, *even the most talented harvest fairies couldn’t have been so precise!*

And the flowers! Fawn stared in amazement. They grew in tidy rows, lined up as neatly as marching ants. Flowers in Pixie Hollow grew hither and thither, wherever the wind—or the garden fairies—planted them.

“What is this place?” Fawn murmured.

Then Fawn saw something that made her catch her breath. Ahead, a massive structure rose up from the grass, so high it seemed to touch the sky. Fawn could tell from the doors and windows that the thing was a house. But who would live in such a house? It was bigger than

the entire Home Tree! Big enough to hold a whole *family* of Clumsies ...



With a start, Fawn realized that she was looking at a Clumsy house. “But that’s impossible!” she said aloud. Clumsies lived on the mainland, a place far, far from Pixie Hollow. So what was a Clumsy house doing inside an old fig tree?

Fawn knew she should fly straight back to the Home Tree and tell the queen what she’d found. But her curiosity got the better of her. Instead of going back, Fawn flew forward.

Right away, Fawn could tell she was no longer in Pixie Hollow. The air felt different. It *smelled* different. She could hear birds singing, but

she didn't recognize their songs. Fawn heard other noises, too—strange rumbling sounds that came and went like ocean waves. For the life of her, she couldn't have said what made them.

Fawn flew slowly through the flowers, enjoying the sense of adventure. *What kinds of animals live here?* she wondered. In Fawn's opinion, you couldn't know much about a place until you met its animals.

The house loomed in front of her. Flying up to a window, Fawn peeked inside. She saw what looked like a sitting room. There were chairs, lamps, and a table. Books and shoes were scattered everywhere. But she didn't see any Clumsies.

Somewhere nearby, a bell jingled faintly.

"Milkweed?" Fawn called. She looked behind her, but the mouse didn't show a whisker.

There's something funny about that jingle, Fawn thought with a frown. Whatever was wearing the bell didn't move like a mouse.

Fawn spun around just in time to see something lunge toward her. She screamed. As she leaped from the windowsill, she caught a glimpse of yellow eyes and needle-sharp teeth.

Fawn zigzagged back the way she'd come, searching for the hollow fig tree. But each way she turned, she saw only a tall wooden fence. "Where is it?" she wailed, lurching this way and that. *"Where is it?"*

With a cold jolt of fear, Fawn realized that the tree wasn't there. The passage back to Pixie Hollow was gone!

Fawn glanced back over her shoulder. She saw now that her pursuer was a cat. His brown fur was striped like a tiger's, and his eyes were like bits of amber. They narrowed as he stalked toward Fawn, his tail twitching eagerly.

Fawn gave up looking for the fig tree and searched for any escape. Along one side of the fence, she noticed a narrow gap between the wooden slats. It would be a tight squeeze. But it was her only chance.



Fawn raced toward the gap in the fence. She reached it just as the cat leaped. Fawn wriggled and twisted, trying to squeeze her wings through. She felt one of the boards move slightly, as though it was loose, and at last she shot through the gap. Behind her, the cat slammed against the fence with an angry yowl.

Fawn looked up and gasped. She was back in Pixie Hollow!

“Wh-what ... how ...?” Fawn stuttered. She spun around. She was hovering in front of the hollow fig tree.

Fawn’s wings felt like they were going to give out. She sank to the ground, trembling all over. *It doesn’t matter how I got here, she thought. The important thing is that I’m still alive.*

Fawn glanced back at the hollow tree and shivered. The tree was dangerous. She knew she had better tell Queen Clarion about it right away.

As Fawn got up to leave, she heard a faint jingle. She looked back at the hollow. Two yellow eyes peered at her from the darkness.

“Oh no!” Fawn cried as a blur of brown fur streaked toward her. She’d led the cat right into Pixie Hollow!



Chapter 4

Lainey trudged down the sidewalk in a haze of disappointment. She, Kate, Gabby, and Mia had searched all over Mia's backyard for the lost bag of fairy dust. They'd combed the flower bed, peeked under the patio furniture, and crawled on their knees over the grass. They would have gone on searching, too, if Mia's mother hadn't said it was getting late and sent them home.

Lainey's house was just three doors down from Mia's, along a street lined with tall, narrow homes and spindly trees. Lainey was so used to the path that she hardly noticed where her feet were taking her.

A ferocious bark startled her out of her thoughts. Lainey jumped back as a black-and-white dog threw itself against the fence she was passing.

Lainey saw this dog every time she walked to Mia's house. Although Lainey loved all animals, she'd been careful to steer clear of this one. The dog was always barking.

But maybe now she didn't need to be afraid. After all, she'd learned so much from Fawn. She'd befriended all kinds of animals in Never Land. Maybe she could make friends with this dog, too. *Someone with real animal talent could*, Lainey thought. And hadn't Fawn told her she had animal talent?

Lainey took a step toward the fence. "There, there," she said soothingly. She didn't know how to speak Dog. But she mimicked the tone Fawn used when she was talking to an upset animal. "Don't be so grouchy. I'm your friend."



The dog paused mid-bark. It stood with its nose against the fence, watching her. “Good dog,” Lainey said.

At once the dog began to bark again, louder than ever. Lainey turned and ran the rest of the way to her house.

As soon as she saw her front door, a wave of homesickness washed over her. Lainey took the steps two at a time and burst through the front door, crying, “I’m back! I’m back!”

“I’m in here, Lainey!” her mother called.

Lainey followed the sound of her voice to the kitchen. Her mother was standing with her back to the door, staring up at the open cupboard.

Tears sprang to Lainey’s eyes. How long had it been since she’d seen her mother? Days? *Weeks*? Only now did Lainey realize how much she’d missed her parents while she was in Never Land. She hurried over to her mom and wrapped her arms around her waist.

“Hi, baby,” her mom said distractedly. “How does spaghetti sound for dinner?”

“Spaghetti sounds good.” Pushing her glasses up on her nose, Lainey straightened and turned to face her mother. So much had happened to her in Never Land. Lainey felt different—no, she *was* different. She was sure her mother would see it in her face.

But at that moment, Mrs. Winters was busy searching the cupboard. She moved some cans around, muttering, “I was sure we had tomato sauce....”

Lainey tugged her mother’s sleeve. “Mom ...”

“Yes, Lainey?” her mother asked, without looking down.

“Do you notice anything *different* about me?” asked Lainey.

At last her mother turned. “Oh, honey,” she said with a sigh. “When was the last time you combed your hair? You look like you’ve been living in the jungle!” She ran her fingernails through Lainey’s fine blond locks. “Go run a brush through it, then call your dad and ask him to pick up some dinner on the way home from work. It looks like we’ll have to have take-out again. We’re out of spaghetti sauce.”

“Okay,” Lainey mumbled, crestfallen. Her throat ached, but this time it wasn’t from homesickness. Suddenly, she was painfully aware of everything she’d lost—the doe and the dairy mice and her friendship with Fawn, the fairies and flamingos, the beauty of Never Land and the specialness she’d felt when she was there. Was even that part gone? Now that she was home again, was she just plain old Lainey?

“Goodness, sweetie, don’t be upset. We can have spaghetti *tomorrow* night, if you really want,” her mother said, misunderstanding.

Lainey sighed heavily and turned to leave. As she did, her gaze fell on something scuttling across the floor. It was a little gray mouse. Lainey stared. She’d never seen a mouse in her house



before. A tiny jingling sound seemed to be coming from it. Looking closer, Lainey saw a bell hanging around its neck.

It was one of the fairies’ dairy mice!

At that moment, Lainey’s mother saw the mouse, too. “Aaah! Get out!” she shrieked, stomping her foot.

“Don’t hurt it!” Lainey exclaimed.

But her mother was striding over to the broom closet. She grabbed a broom and began to chase the mouse around the kitchen.

“Mom, stop!” cried Lainey.

“I won’t have mice in *my* house!” her mother declared, swiping at it with the broom. The mouse dodged the bristles one last time and disappeared through a crack in the wall.

“You almost killed it!” Lainey wailed.

“Mice are *pests*,” her mother said. “They’re *vermin* that carry diseases. For all we know, there could be a whole nest of them living behind the walls.” She shuddered. “I think I have some mousetraps down in the basement. For heaven’s sake, stay away from there,” she added as Lainey kneeled down to peek into the crack. “Who knows what kind of germs that thing has.”

Her mother stomped off toward the basement. As soon as she was gone, Lainey got down on her hands and knees to look into the hole.

“Eeee-eee,” she squeaked softly.

Nothing happened, so she squeaked again. She could see a pair of beady black eyes gleaming inside the hole. “It’s okay,” Lainey whispered. “I’m your friend.”

The mouse wiggled its whiskers, but it wouldn’t come closer.

What was going on? Was it possible she’d lost her animal talent when she’d left Never Land?

Then Lainey had a scarier thought. Maybe she’d never had any animal talent after all. Maybe Fawn had only said that to be nice.

Lainey felt worse than ever. But she knew she didn’t have time to mope. Her mother would be back with the mousetrap any moment. Lainey had to find a way to keep the mouse safe.

She went to the cupboard and found a plastic container with a lid. Then she took a block of cheese from the refrigerator and cut off a slice.

She put the piece of cheese in front of the mouse hole. Then she stepped back and waited.

A moment passed. Then a pink nose poked out of the hole, followed by a set of whiskers. Slowly, the mouse crept out, sniffing at the cheese.



Slam! Lainey dropped the container over it. Carefully, she slid the plastic lid under the edge, leaving a little opening for air. Now the mouse was trapped.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Lainey whispered to the mouse as she hurried to her room. She could feel the little animal scrabbling against the side of the plastic container. She’d have to find a better place for the mouse, maybe a shoe box. But still Lainey felt ashamed. She knew

no self-respecting animal talent would ever trap a mouse like this.
What would Fawn think if she saw Lainey now?

Another, more important question burned in Lainey's mind—what was a mouse from Pixie Hollow doing *here*?



chapter 5

Fawn dodged left, then right, trying to shake the cat. Her shoulders ached and her breath came in gasps. She didn't know how much longer she could keep flying. But no matter how she twisted and turned, the cat was always just behind her.

Ahead, Fawn saw a raspberry bush. She headed straight for it, darting into the branches with her last bit of strength.

Fawn peered out between the leaves. She could see the cat watching her hiding spot with its yellow eyes. "Why are you bothering me?" Fawn called out in Cat. She hadn't talked to many cats before, but the language came to her naturally. Part of an animal-fairy's magic was being able to speak to any creature.

The cat blinked. It was clear that he wasn't used to being questioned by his prey. "Come out where I can see you, shiny bird," he said.

Shiny bird? Fawn thought, confused. Then she understood. *He thinks I'm a bird! He's attracted to my glow.*

"I'm not a bird!" she yelled to the cat. "I'm a fairy!"

The cat blinked again. "Dragonfly?"

Was it possible this cat had never seen a fairy before? “Not a dragonfly. A fairy!” Fawn shouted.

“Flying thing?” the cat said. If he’d had shoulders, he would have shrugged.

Fawn realized she was getting nowhere talking to him. She had to find another way out of this mess.

Fawn plucked a raspberry from the bush. She weighed it in her palm, considering. A single fairy wasn’t strong enough to fight a cat. But Fawn knew cats were proud animals. Maybe if she wounded his pride, he would go away.

Fawn threw the berry as hard as she could, hitting the cat squarely between the eyes. The cat jerked back, startled. He tried to shake the berry off his head. Then he lifted his chin and stalked away, as if he had important business elsewhere.



Fawn grinned as the cat broke into a run. Her plan was working!

But a second later, her smile faded. The cat wasn’t running *away* from Fawn—he was running *toward* something.

Just beyond the edge of the woods, a mouse cart was passing through the meadow. The cart driver, a sparrow man named Dooley, was whistling to himself. He didn’t see the cat creeping up behind him.

“Dooley!” Fawn shrieked. “Look out!”

Too late! The cat landed on the cart, and its load of walnuts spilled across the trail. The cart mice squealed and bolted, throwing Dooley from his seat.

Dooley tried to fly, but the cat caught him between his front paws. He batted him back and forth, toying with him as if he were a ball of yarn.

“Leave him alone, you ratty tabby!” Summoning her courage, Fawn flew right up to the cat’s nose and gave his whiskers a yank.



The cat yowled in pain and leaped back. Fawn took the moment to grab Dooley’s hand. She pulled him to safety in a nearby mole hole.

“Are you all right?” Fawn asked. The stunned sparrow man’s glow flickered like a firefly. But he didn’t have any scratches as far as Fawn could tell.

“Wh-wh—” Dooley stuttered. “Wh-where did that monster *come* from?”

Before Fawn could reply, they heard squeals. Fawn peeked out the hole. The driverless mouse cart was careening in circles as the terrified mice ran this way and that.

“He’s going to get the mice!” Fawn cried.

But to her surprise, the cat bounded right past the mouse cart. Something else had caught his eye.

Ahead was the Home Tree, sparkling with the hundreds of fairies who wove in and out of its branches, going about their business.

Fawn gasped. What had she done? In trying to drive the cat away, she’d sent him straight to the heart of the fairies’ world!

“Stay here. I’ll send someone to help you with the mice,” Fawn told Dooley. Then she raced off toward the Home Tree to warn the other fairies.

In the pebbled courtyard in front of the Home Tree’s knothole door, a group of fairies sat enjoying a picnic. The cat headed straight toward them, his tail twitching with pleasure.

“Fly!” Fawn screamed. “Fly away!” But she was too far off to be heard.

Wham! The cat pounced, landing in the middle of the picnic. Seashell plates and acorn teacups crashed to the ground. Cries of horror filled the courtyard. The cat danced on his hind legs, swiping happily at the fairies as they darted out of the way.



In an instant, the Home Tree was in chaos. The singing-talent fairies' songs turned to screams. A laundry-talent fairy dropped a whole line of washing, which sailed away on a breeze. Fairies and sparrow men crashed into each other as they tried to escape.

Fawn grabbed a blueberry from an overturned barrel and threw it at the cat. But the cat was too dazzled by the fairies to even notice. He slinked around the trunk, looking for one to catch.

Between the roots at the back of the Home Tree was the entrance to the kitchen. The doorway was just wide enough to fit a small melon—or a large cat. As Fawn reached the back of the tree, she saw the tip of the cat's fluffy tail disappear inside.

“Oh no!” Fawn gasped. The kitchen fairies would be trapped!

But a second later, the cat came streaking back out. Right behind him came a band of red-faced kitchen fairies. Some hollered and banged on pots and pans. Others pelted the cat with peppercorns.

The cat fled.

“Good thing we were making pepper soup today,” the baking-talent fairy Dulcie said when she caught Fawn's eye.

When the cat was a good distance away, he stopped running. He paced back and forth, casting sulky glances at the Home Tree.

“But it looks to me like we haven't seen the last of that cat,” Dulcie added.



Chapter 6

Lainey awoke to the sound of fairy laughter. *It's Prilla coming to wake us up!* she thought.

She opened her eyes, expecting to see sunlight dappling the branches of the willow-tree room. Instead, she found herself staring at a painted white ceiling.

Lainey sat up. She was in her own bed in her own room. There was no willow tree and no fairy coming to wake her. Only thin sunlight coming through blue curtains and the smell of her parents' coffee brewing—the same things she'd woken to her whole life.

And yet ... she could still hear a tiny bell-like sound.

Lainey leaned over the side of her bed. There was the old shoe box she'd put on the floor the night before. Holding her breath, Lainey lifted the lid—

The little mouse stood up on his hind legs to greet her, the bell around his neck jingling faintly. Lainey smiled. *So it wasn't a dream*

after all, she thought.

“Good morning, fella,” she said softly. She held out her finger to the mouse, who sniffed it with interest. He seemed less afraid than he had been the day before.

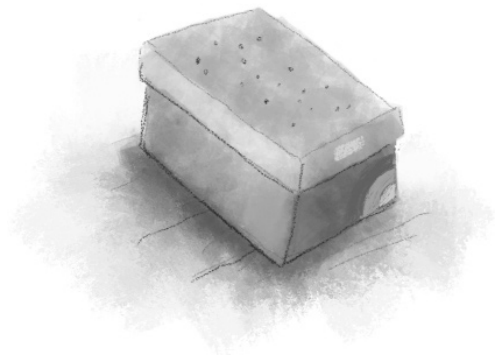
Now, for the first time, Lainey noticed a notch in his ear. She remembered that one of the dairy mice had a funny ear.

“Milkweed?” she said. “Is that you?”

The mouse didn’t seem to hear her. He sniffed around the shoe box, as if looking for a crumb. Lainey was glad to see that he’d eaten the pizza crust she’d left for him the night before.

“I’ll bet you’re hungry for breakfast,” she said. “Coming right up.”

Lainey carefully placed the lid back on the box. She pushed it under the bed so her mother wouldn’t find it, then went downstairs to get something to eat.



In the kitchen, she found a note from her mother saying she’d gone to pick up a few things at the store and her dad had gone into work. Lainey placed a frozen waffle in the toaster. She had just poured herself a glass of orange juice when the phone rang.

Lainey picked up the phone. It was Mia.

“Mia!” Lainey cried. “Guess what I found—”

“It’s awful, Lainey!” Mia interrupted, her voice cracking. “I can’t find him anywhere!”

“Can’t find who?” asked Lainey, confused.

“Bingo! He’s *missing*!” Tearfully, Mia explained that the cat hadn’t been seen since the day before. “He didn’t come when I called him. I

even put out a bowl of tuna fish, but he didn't turn up. He *never* misses tuna fish."

"Maybe he's out exploring," Lainey said.

"He doesn't leave the backyard." Mia sniffled. "I'm worried something bad happened. Will you help me look for him?"

"I'll be right there," Lainey said.

When she'd hung up, Lainey took the waffle out of the toaster. She wrote a quick note to her parents, then hurried upstairs. She fed pieces of waffle to the mouse as she got dressed.

After she was done, Lainey took the mouse out of the shoe box and gently placed him in her sweatshirt pocket. "Don't worry, little fella," she whispered. "I'll take care of you. I promise."

When Lainey got to Mia's house, Mia and Gabby were sitting on the front steps. Mia's eyes were rimmed with red, as if she'd been crying. Kate was there, too, looking as if she hadn't slept very well.

"I was up all night, looking for the Second Star to the Right," Kate told Lainey. "But I couldn't find it. The queen never told us what it was to the right *of*. Not that it matters anyway," she added, "since we lost the fairy dust."

"Guys," said Lainey, "something really weird happened last night. You aren't going to believe it." Reaching into her sweatshirt pocket, she pulled out the little mouse.



Mia jumped back in surprise. “Why are you carrying a mouse around?” she asked Lainey.

“It’s not just any mouse,” Lainey replied. “It’s Milkweed.”

“Milkwhat?” asked Kate.

“His name is Milkweed,” Lainey explained. “He’s one of the fairies’ mice.”

Gabby stepped forward to pet the mouse. “Hullo, Milkweed,” she said, stroking his head with the tip of her finger.

“What’s so important about him?” asked Kate.

“Well, that’s the thing,” said Lainey. “Don’t you wonder how he got here?”

“You brought him in your pocket,” Kate pointed out.

“But I *found* him in our kitchen last night,” Lainey said. “Don’t you think it’s strange that a Never Land mouse turned up in my home?”

“Can we talk about this later?” Mia said impatiently. “Right now, we really need to find Bingo!”

The girls decided to split up to look for the cat. Mia and Gabby took one side of the street, while Lainey and Kate took the other. They walked up and down the neighborhood, calling Bingo’s name. But they didn’t spot so much as a single paw print.

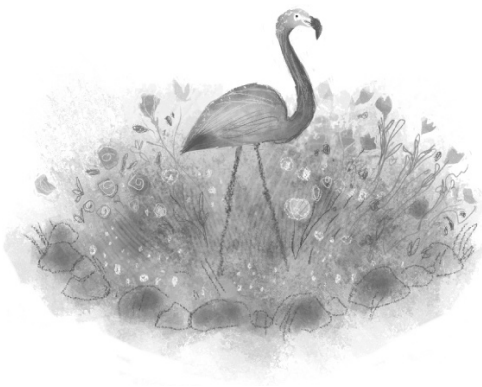
Finally, they returned to Mia and Gabby’s house. When Mrs. Vasquez saw how disappointed they looked, she poured them glasses of lemonade. The girls took their drinks into the backyard. A dark cloud had settled over the group.

“We’re never going to find Bingo,” Mia said despairingly.

“We’re never going to get back to Never Land,” added Kate.

Something in the corner of the yard caught Lainey’s eye. “Mia,” she said, “when did you get that?”

“Get what?” asked Mia.



“That plastic flamingo,” Lainey said, pointing to the tall pink bird in the flower bed. At that moment, the flamingo turned its head. It fixed them with a bright yellow eye. “*Awnk!*” it honked.

The girls screamed and jumped to their feet. Lemonade spilled everywhere.

“Mia?” Mrs. Vasquez called from inside the house. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing, Mami!” Mia yelled. She looked back at the flamingo. It was perched on one foot in the middle of Mrs. Vasquez’s rosebushes. “What is a *flamingo* doing here?” she whispered.

“Maybe it escaped from the zoo?” Kate guessed.

“Maybe,” said Lainey, her heart filling with hope, “it came from Never Land!”

The other girls turned to her. But before anyone could reply, they heard footsteps coming from inside the house. “Quick!” Mia whispered. “Hide it!”

“Hide it?” said Kate. “How? It’s as tall as we are!”

“I have an idea!” said Lainey. “Kate, kneel down. You too, Mia. Hurry!”

When Mrs. Vasquez stepped outside a moment later, Gabby was sitting on Mia’s shoulders. Lainey was sitting on Kate’s shoulders. They crowded together in the corner of the yard, blocking the flamingo from her view.

“What on earth are you all doing?” Mrs. Vasquez asked.

“We’re having chicken races!” Lainey said brightly as Kate staggered beneath her, trying to keep her balance.

“*Awnk!*” honked the flamingo behind them.

“*Bok!*” shouted Lainey. “It’s part of the game. You have to say, ‘*Bok, bok!*’”

“*Bok! Bok! Bok!*” The girls all began to yell to cover up the noises the flamingo was making.

Mrs. Vasquez frowned. “It looks dangerous. Can’t you girls play something where you all keep your feet on the ground?” She started into the house, then paused and turned back. “And, girls, please don’t play too close to the flower bed. Those are my prize roses!” She slid open the screen door and went inside.

“Oof!” Kate grunted as she fell to the grass, tipping Lainey off her shoulders. “You’re a lot heavier than you look. Now, what were you saying?”

Lainey's heart was beating fast. "What if the flamingo is from Never Land?" she whispered to her friends.

"What would it be doing here?" asked Mia.

For the first time since they'd lost the fairy dust, Kate's face lit up. "The fairies must have sent him! I'll bet he's here to show us the way back to Never Land!"

At once the girls turned toward the bird. It looked back at them warily.

"Come on, Mr. Bird. Tell us how to get back to Never Land," Kate coaxed.

"Look!" cried Gabby. "He's trying to get away!" The flamingo was spreading his wings, as if he was about to take to the air.

"Not so fast!" cried Kate. She lunged at the flamingo, which hopped just out of her reach. Kate began to chase him through the flower bed. Petals flew from the roses.



“Kate!” Mia wailed. “Watch out for Mami’s flowers!”

Kate ignored her and dove into the middle of the petunias. She managed to grab the flamingo by the leg.

“I got him— Ow!” Kate cried as the flamingo beat her about the head with his wings, trying to escape. “Quick! Someone find something to hold him!”

“I know how to catch him!” Gabby hurried to the back door and grabbed a butterfly net that was leaning up against the house. She ran toward Kate and the flamingo, waving it.

“Don’t!” cried Lainey. “He’s scared.” The flamingo was flapping his wings, straining to get away. At last the bird managed to pull his foot from Kate’s grip. He rose into the air, sailed a short distance, and landed on the roof of Mia and Gabby’s house.

The girls stared up at him. “Well,” said Mia, “*now* what do we do?”

“*Awnk!*” said the flamingo.



Chapter 7

Silence had settled across Pixie Hollow. In the gardens, the spider-thread hammocks hung empty. On Havendish Stream, the fairies' leaf-boats bobbed forlornly on their anchors. Not a whisper of wings could be heard across the meadow. The only sound was the splash of the waterwheel as it turned in the stream for an empty mill.

Inside the Home Tree, fairies peeked from the windows. They were watching for the furry beast that had driven them all behind doors. Many fairies had gathered in the grand dining hall. The serving talents were passing out acorn caps full of blackberry tea to soothe everyone's jangled nerves.

As Fawn wandered through the dining hall, she heard snippets of talk among the fairies.

"I've never seen a monster like that in Pixie Hollow before...."

"Did you see it knock down the bridge?"

"We can't stay inside forever! We'll starve, you know...."

In a corner of the dining room, a small group of fairies hovered around Dooley. His glow had returned, but he still wore a tragic look on his face. He clutched a teacup and a plate of poppy-seed cake as he told his story. “I swear on my wings, I was *inches* from being eaten! My whole life *flashed* before my eyes. Mmm. This is very tasty cake. You know, I think another slice might help me get my strength back....”



Fawn felt terrible. She knew that this was all her fault. If she hadn't flown into the Clumsy garden, the cat never would have chased her into Pixie Hollow.

And yet, Fawn still didn't understand what had happened. How had she gotten to the Clumsy garden to begin with?

Fawn spotted Queen Clarion standing before one of the tall dining hall windows. The queen held a cup of tea in her hand, but she never raised it to her lips. She gazed outside with a puzzled expression. Fawn made her way over to her.

Queen Clarion turned her head. "Oh, Fawn. I was just thinking how strange this all is. Usually Never creatures are respectful of the fairy realm—even the hawks and snakes."

Fawn cleared her throat. "The thing is," she began, "the cat isn't from Never Land."

The queen raised her eyebrows. "Then where did it come from?"

"I, ah, I don't really know," Fawn admitted. Taking a deep breath, she explained how she'd gone looking for Milkweed and instead stumbled upon a Clumsy's house inside an old fig tree.

"What Clumsy?" asked Queen Clarion. "Was it a pirate? Or one of Peter Pan's boys?"

Fawn shook her head. "I don't know. I never saw any Clumsies there. But it wasn't just a house. The grass was different and the flowers were different. It even had a different sky. It was a whole Clumsy world."

"But that's impossible," said the queen. "To get to the world of Clumsies, you'd have to fly across an ocean!"

"I don't understand it, either," said Fawn. "But that's where I saw the cat. He started to chase me. When I tried to escape, I found myself

right back in Pixie Hollow—and the cat was with me!”

The queen furrowed her brow. “It doesn’t make sense.”

Tinker Bell had been sitting nearby, tinkering with a thimble bucket. Suddenly, she spoke up. “Maybe there’s a hole.”

The queen and Fawn both turned to her. “What do you mean?” asked Queen Clarion.

“Like a shortcut between Never Land and the mainland,” said Tink. “Usually, they’re far apart. They exist in separate realms. But if there was a hole ...” Tink took the cup of tea from Queen Clarion’s hand and poured it into the bucket. Tea dribbled out the bottom. “Things could fall through.”



“If there was a hole, wouldn’t we know about it?” asked Queen Clarion.

“It could be a pinprick hole,” Tink said. “They’re the sneakiest kind. You don’t know about them until you spring a leak.”

“A hole between Never Land and the mainland,” the queen murmured, her frown deepening. “If it’s true, all kinds of dangers could reach Pixie Hollow.”

Tink nodded. “The cat might be the least of our troubles.”

Fawn chewed her lip. She’d just thought of something. “If there’s a hole, that means things can go both ways.”

“What are you saying?” asked Tink.

“If the cat followed me here, that means he can follow me back.” Fawn lifted her chin bravely. “I’ll lead the cat back to the Clumsy house. I’ll use myself as bait.”

The queen looked shocked. “I forbid it,” she said. “It’s too dangerous.”

“It’s the only way,” Fawn said. “If I don’t, we may be stuck inside the Home Tree forever.”

Tink stood up. “You can’t do it alone. I’ll help you.”

Fawn was about to say no. But when she saw the fierce look in Tink’s eyes, she nodded. She would need all the help she could get.





“Somebody *do* something!” Mia said.

Kate took off her sneaker and hurled it at the flamingo. The shoe sailed through the air, missing the bird by a mile. It landed in the rain gutter.

The flamingo looked at it curiously. It stepped over to the sneaker and began to peck at the laces.

“That’s just great,” Kate groaned. She threw herself down on the grass. “Now a flamingo is eating my shoe.”

“And I still don’t know where Bingo is,” Mia said, sinking down next to her. “This has got to be the worst day ever.”

Lainey and Gabby sat down, too. Lainey took Milkweed from her pocket and stroked his furry head. *I wish I could talk to you*, she thought. *You could tell me what’s going on.*

Suddenly, Milkweed twisted in her hands and leaped onto the grass. Before Lainey could grab him, he dashed across the lawn, wriggled

through a narrow gap in the fence, and disappeared.

“Oh no!” Lainey jumped up and ran to the fence. She tried to peer between the slats. “Where did he go?”

Gabby put her eye right up to the fence slats. “I see him!” she cried.

“Quick! Kate, Mia, give me a boost!” Lainey cried. Kate and Mia ran over and lifted Lainey so she could see over the top of the fence. Lainey scanned the neighbor’s yard on the other side, but there was no sign of the mouse. “He’s gone!”

“But I saw him. I did!” Gabby insisted.

“Well, he’s gone now,” Lainey said sadly as Mia and Kate helped her down.

Lainey imagined Milkweed loose in the alley. *What if he meets up with a cat or a dog or a mousetrap?* she thought. Even if he escaped those dangers, how would he find food or a safe place to sleep? Their city street was nothing like the mossy hummocks and flower-filled meadows of Pixie Hollow.

Why had he run away like that? All Lainey wanted to do was take care of him, but it seemed she’d failed even in that. She felt a lump in her throat. She couldn’t even look after a *mouse*! How disappointed Fawn would be if she knew.

“Look, he’s coming back!” Gabby said.

For one hopeful moment, Lainey thought she meant Milkweed. But Gabby was pointing at the house. The girls watched as the flamingo lifted off from the roof. He glided down and landed on the grass a few feet away from Lainey.

“*Awnk!*” The flamingo turned his head to one side. His beady eye stared at Lainey.

He looks like he wants to tell me something, Lainey thought.

“It’s no use,” Lainey told the bird bitterly. “I don’t understand.”



“*Awnk!*” The flamingo took a few steps toward the fence, then twisted his neck to look back at Lainey. He reminded Lainey of the Never doe. Whenever she’d wanted to go for a run in the forest, she’d given Lainey a look like that, and Lainey had always understood.

But that was in Never Land, Lainey reminded herself. Here she didn’t have animal talent. Still, she couldn’t shake the idea that the flamingo was trying to tell her something.

“What is it?” Lainey whispered. She took a step toward the bird. Tentatively, she reached out and touched the flamingo’s wing. His

feathers felt silky beneath her fingers.

Suddenly, a net swooped down over the flamingo's head. Lainey looked up, startled, and saw Kate gripping the handle of the butterfly net.

"I got him!" Kate cried. "Now he can't get away!"

"Kate, stop! You're scaring him!" Lainey cried as the flamingo began to flail and whip his head.

"Awnk! Awnk! Awnk!" Lainey didn't need to have animal talent to know that the bird was upset. She grabbed the net from Kate's hands to set him free.


But at that moment, the flamingo began to run. For such a spindly bird, he was surprisingly strong. Still holding the butterfly net, Lainey was pulled along with it.

"Lainey, let go!" her friends yelled as the bird circled, dragging Lainey behind him.

"I can't!" Lainey cried. The butterfly net seemed to be attached to her arm. She looked and saw a tiny wire loop on the handle. It had gotten hooked on her lasso bracelet.



The flamingo swung around and headed right for the fence. “Stop! Stop!” Lainey screamed. But the bird charged toward the fence at full speed. They were going to crash!



Chapter 9

“Ready?” asked Fawn.

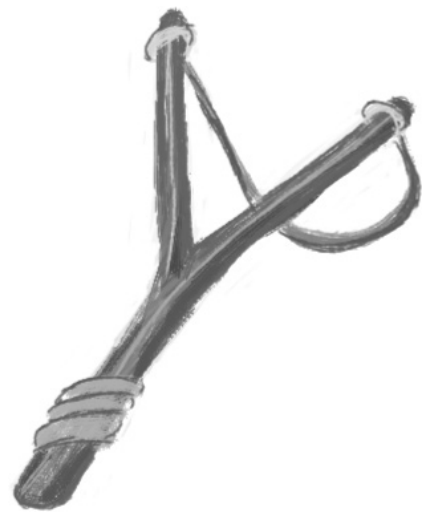
Tinker Bell checked the slingshot on her belt, then nodded. “Ready.”

That afternoon, Tink and Fawn had carefully made their plan to lure the cat back through the hole to the mainland. Fawn would go first, taunting the cat and leading him toward the hollow tree. Tink would follow her and act as lookout. Queen Clarion had given them both extra fairy dust to help them fly faster.

At the last moment, Tink had tucked the slingshot and a pouch full of peppercorns into her belt. “Just in case,” she’d told Fawn.

Fawn eased open the knothole door of the Home Tree and peeked outside. She could see the cat prowling around the roots of the tree.

Fawn took a deep breath. “Hey, fish breath!” she called out in Cat. The cat turned to look. Its eyes lit up at the sight of the fairy.



“Catch me if you can!” cried Fawn, and dove into the air.

The cat leaped after her. To make sure she had him hooked, Fawn led him on a winding chase through Pixie Hollow. First she flew toward the dairy barn. The cat followed closely, as she’d hoped he would.

Just before she reached the barn, Fawn made a hairpin turn and flew in the opposite direction, toward the fairy circle. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the cat right behind her. His golden eyes were bright with pleasure, as if he was enjoying every moment of the chase.

“Nasty beast,” Fawn muttered under her breath. “Only a monster wants to *play* with his lunch before he eats it.”

She flew two loops around a hawthorn tree, making sure the cat stayed with her.

“You’ve got him!” Tink cried from somewhere to her left. “Now go!”

Fawn looped back around and headed toward Havendish Stream and the fairy dust mill. She knew that just beyond, on the far side of the stream, was the hollow fig tree.

“Almost there,” Fawn told herself. Soon this whole nightmare would be over. She put on a burst of speed.

But as the tree came into view, Fawn saw something sitting at the mouth of the hollow. As she drew closer, she realized who it was. “Milkweed!”

Hearing his name, the mouse looked up. He wiggled his whiskers in greeting.



Oh no! thought Fawn. If she led the cat to the hollow now, he might go after Milkweed instead. Fawn didn't want to put the mouse in danger. But she couldn't keep up the chase much longer. For a second, Fawn paused in the air, unsure what to do.

The moment's hesitation was all it took. The cat saw its chance and pounced.

"Fawn!" Tink screamed. "Look out!"

Fawn tried to lurch out of the way, but she was a second too late. The cat's paw struck her. It sent her spinning through the air.

Fawn plummeted toward the ground. She landed in Havendish Stream.

Right away, Fawn knew she was in deep trouble. Like all Never fairies, Fawn couldn't swim. The second she hit the stream, her wings began to soak up water. They started to drag her down.

Just as Fawn's head was about to go under, she felt someone grasp her hand. Tink was trying to pull her out! Tink fluttered her wings with all her might. As she did, her slingshot came loose from her belt. It landed with a splash next to Fawn's head and sank below the waves.



With her soaked wings, Fawn was too heavy to lift out of the stream. Still gripping Fawn's hand, Tink started to tow her through the water toward shore. At last, she managed to pull her onto the bank.

A shadow fell over them. The fairies looked up and saw the cat closing in.

"Fly!" screamed Tink. Fawn tried to flap her wings, but they felt like sandbags on her back.

The cat loomed over them. The last thing Fawn saw was the cat's lips peeling back from its needle-like teeth.

Fawn closed her eyes. As she braced herself, she heard a booming "*Awnk!*"

Her eyes flew open just in time to see a flamingo burst from the hollow tree. And dragging along behind it was—

"Lainey!" Fawn cried.

If Lainey heard her, Fawn couldn't tell. The girl's eyes were squeezed tightly shut. Her hair was flying in every direction and her glasses hung from one ear. She clutched the handle of a large net, clinging to it as if for dear life.



“Help!” Lainey cried.

The cat caught one glimpse of the flamingo and turned tail. It sprinted away, yowling in terror.

Suddenly, Lainey felt the flamingo come to a stop beneath her. She slowly peeled open one eye, then the other. She was back in Pixie Hollow!

“*Awnk! Awnk!*” Lainey heard the voice of another flamingo. She looked around but couldn’t see it. Then she spotted Fawn. The fairy was calling to the bird in its own language, calming it down.

But how did I get here? Lainey wondered. She looked behind her and spotted Kate, Mia, and Gabby climbing out of a hollow tree.

“It’s you!” Tinker Bell cried when she saw the girls. “What are you doing here?”

“I don’t know!” said Kate, looking equally surprised. “We were in Mia’s backyard a second ago. We saw the flamingo pull Lainey

through the fence, so we ran to help her—”

“And we ended up here!” Mia broke in. “How did we do that?”

It took a few moments for Fawn, Tink, and the four girls to piece together what had happened. When the flamingo had dragged Lainey toward the fence, the girls had all thought they were going to crash.

“But instead, when they hit the fence, the slat swung sideways and they went right through,” said Mia. “So we all followed Lainey, and here we are!”

“There’s a loose board,” Kate explained.

“And when you go through, you get to Never Land!” Gabby chimed in, not wanting to be left out of the story.

“I still don’t understand,” said Fawn. “How did you go from the broken fence to the hollow tree?”

Tink tugged her bangs, deep in thought. “The pinprick hole,” she said at last.

“The what?” asked Lainey.

Tink explained her theory about the hole between Never Land and the mainland.

“So you mean there’s a passage that goes from Pixie Hollow right to Mia and Gabby’s backyard?” Kate exclaimed. “That’s perfect! Now we can come back whenever we want!”

“It’s not perfect,” Tink said, her face serious. “In fact, it’s very dangerous. We’ve already had problems. A cat has been on the loose in Pixie Hollow—”

“Did you say a *cat*?” Mia asked.

At that moment, they heard a bell jingling. The sound made Fawn’s blood run cold. With a gasp, she turned and saw the cat running toward them.

“Fly, Tink!” Fawn cried. “Don’t worry about me! Save yourself!”

But this time the cat barely seemed to notice the fairies. It ran right past Fawn—and straight into Mia’s open arms.





“Oh, Bingo! I was so worried about you!” Mia said, rubbing her face in the cat’s fluffy fur.

“You ... *know* this cat?” Fawn asked.

“He’s my Bingo,” Mia replied, squeezing the cat tightly. “I’ve been looking all over for him. I was afraid he’d gotten into trouble.”

“*Causing* trouble is more like it,” Tink said. “He’s frightened every fairy in Pixie Hollow. They’re all cowering in the Home Tree at this very moment.”

Mia lifted Bingo up so they were nose to nose. “Bingo! Bad boy!” she scolded.

Bingo only yawned in reply. “Don’t let him fool you,” Mia told the fairies. “He may pretend to be tough, but he wouldn’t hurt a fly. He just wants to play.”

“To play?” Fawn echoed faintly. “You mean, the cat has only been trying to play with us this whole time?”

Mia nodded. “I know he can be a bit rough, but it’s not his fault. He’s still just a baby—not much older than a kitten. He loves to have fun.”

Tink rolled her eyes. “Some kind of fun.”

The sound of another bell made everyone turn. A little gray mouse was making his way toward them.

“Milkweed!” Lainey cried in relief. She picked him up. Lainey watched the mouse sniff the palm of her hand. She knew she needed to tell Fawn the truth—that she didn’t really have animal talent. She wondered if Fawn would still want to be her friend.

“I lost Milkweed on the mainland,” Lainey confessed to Fawn. “I thought I’d lost him for good. I couldn’t communicate with him at all—or with the dog or any other animals. I don’t really have animal

talent,” she added. “At home, I’m not really good at anything. I’m just a regular old Clumsy.”

“Oh, Lainey,” Fawn said. “Animal talent doesn’t come and go. It’s something in your heart. And you have a very big heart. That’s even more important than being able to speak to animals. Speaking isn’t everything—even I sometimes misunderstand,” she added with a glance at Bingo.

“So you still want to be my friend?” Lainey asked.

“Of course,” said Fawn. She was too tiny to hug Lainey, so she hugged her thumb.

Lainey felt better. “And now I can come visit you any time!” she said. “All we have to do is go through the fence.”

“What *are* you going to do about the hole?” Kate asked Tinker Bell. “You’re not going to close it up, I hope?”

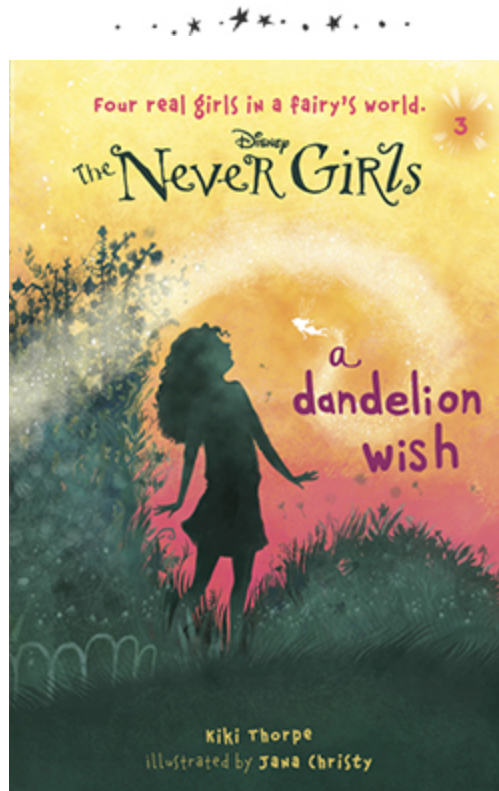
“I wouldn’t even begin to know how,” Tink replied. She tugged her bangs, thinking. “Still, the hole is a danger. We have to do something. We’ll start with telling Queen Clarion.”

“Why don’t you come with us?” Fawn said to the girls. “All the fairies are in the Home Tree right now. They’ll be so glad to see you. Lainey, my wings are too wet to fly. Will you carry me?”

Together the girls and the fairies set off for the Home Tree. Lainey was filled with pride carrying Fawn on her shoulder. There were so many questions still to be answered—about the hole in the fence that led to Never Land and whether she had animal talent. But one thing no longer bothered her. Lainey was certain now that she was special. For, she thought, there was nothing more special in the world than being a fairy’s friend.



Turn the page for a sneak peek of
wedding wings, the next Never Girls
adventure!



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Chapter 1

Mia Vasquez awoke Saturday morning with a fluttery feeling in her chest. A feeling that something great awaited her that day.

She rubbed her eyes, trying to recall what it was. Then she remembered: *Never Land*.

The two words sent her leaping from her bed. She ran to the window and looked out at the backyard. White clouds chased each other across the blue sky. The grass was tall and the flowers bloomed in their beds. But it was the high wooden fence that held Mia's attention.

The day before, Mia, her little sister, Gabby, and her friends Kate and Lainey had discovered that by crawling through a loose board in the fence, they could reach the magical island of Never Land. No one knew how the passage between the two worlds had come to be—not even the fairies whose magic had brought the girls to Never Land in the first place. But to Mia it was a dream come true. To think she could visit the fairy world anytime she wanted, just by going through the fence in her own backyard!

Mia dressed quickly in a polka-dotted skirt and her favorite pink T-shirt. Her long, curly black hair fell over her shoulders. She considered a pretty pair of sandals, then pulled on her sneakers instead. Sneakers were better for adventures—and there were always adventures to be had in Never Land.

When she was dressed, Mia hurried downstairs to the kitchen. She poured herself a bowl of cereal and slid into a chair next to her little sister. Gabby was wearing a pink tutu and a pair of costume fairy wings—her everyday outfit. She was drawing a picture of a fairy with crayons.

The girls' mother was standing at the kitchen counter, drinking a cup of coffee. "That's a nice drawing, Gabby," she said. "What's the fairy's name?"

"That's Tinker Bell," Gabby said. "She lives in Pixie Hollow."

Mrs. Vasquez smiled. "Where is that?"

"It's on the other side of the—
Ow! Mia!" Gabby exclaimed as Mia kicked her under the table. When she caught Gabby's eye, Mia frowned and shook her head. Their parents didn't know about Never Land, and Mia didn't want them to find out. She had a feeling that if they did, the girls' adventuring would be over.

Out the kitchen window, Mia could see her father working in the yard. She hoped he would be done soon. Otherwise, they couldn't sneak through the fence.

"Is Papi going to be doing yard work for long?" Mia asked her mother casually. "Kate and Lainey are coming over. We were going to, um ... play outside."



“Your friends can’t come over today, Mia,” her mother said. “I’m going out to do some errands, and I need you to look after Gabby.”

“What? But I already told them they could come!” Mia cried.

“You’ll have to call them and tell them they can’t,” her mother replied.

And not go to Never Land? Mia couldn’t bear the thought. “Can’t they come over anyway?” she asked. “We can all watch Gabby together.”

“No, Mia,” said her mom. “If you get busy playing with your friends, you’ll forget to keep an eye on Gabby.”

“I wouldn’t!” Mia said. She thought of the first time they’d found themselves in Never Land, pulled there on a fairy’s blink. Hadn’t she and her friends taken good care of Gabby then? But, of course, she couldn’t point this out to her mother.

“Kate and Lainey can come over another time,” Mrs. Vasquez said.

“It’s not fair!” Mia complained. “Papi’s here. Why can’t he watch Gabby?”

“Papi is busy today. Mia, please don’t sulk. It’s just one day. You’re old enough to be responsible.”

“Who cares about being responsible?” Mia grumbled under her breath. She watched, arms folded, as her mother picked up her purse and left.

When she was gone, Mia called Kate and Lainey and told them they couldn’t come over. Then she returned to the table, plopped herself down in a chair, and glared at her sister.

Gabby didn’t seem to notice. “Do you want to play a game?”

“No,” Mia snapped.

“Do you want to color?” asked Gabby.

Mia’s frown deepened. “No. Why don’t you go watch TV or something?”

“I’m not supposed to watch TV unless Mami says it’s okay,” Gabby pointed out.

“Well, I’m in charge today, and *I* say it’s okay,” Mia replied.

At once, Gabby hopped up from the table. She ran into the living room. A moment later, Mia heard the TV turn on.

With nothing better to do, Mia followed her into the living room. She flopped down on the sofa. On the television screen, a bunch of cartoon monsters were singing a silly song.

Mia sighed. She couldn't think of anything more frustrating than to be stuck watching a lame kiddie show when she could be spending time with *real* fairies.



She looked out the living room window at the high wooden fence. Never Land lay just on the other side. She could reach it in less than thirty seconds.

Well, why shouldn't I? Mia thought. *I could just pop over and see what's going on in Pixie Hollow. I'll be back before anyone even knows I'm gone.*

Mia glanced at her sister. Gabby was caught up in her cartoon. *She'll be fine for a few minutes,* Mia thought.

Quietly, she slipped off the couch and let herself out the back door.

She didn't see her father, but she could hear him whistling. He was working somewhere around the side of the house. Now was her chance.

The loose board was on the fence that separated the yard from their neighbor's. Mia had to spend a few moments nudging the boards until she found the right one. The board swung sideways on its nail, creating a gap just big enough for her to squeeze through.

As Mia knelt down, she felt a warm breeze on her face. She could smell jasmine and sun-warmed moss—the sweet scent of Pixie Hollow. She took a deep breath, then crawled through the opening, pulling the board back into place behind her.



She came out from a hollow tree into a sun-dappled forest. To her left was a wildflower-filled meadow. To her right, Havendish Stream bubbled between its banks. And just beyond the stream lay Pixie Hollow. Mia could see fairies darting through the air as they flew to and from the giant Home Tree.

Mia heard a commotion downstream. She followed the sound around a bend, to a small wooden bridge. Dozens of fairies swarmed around the bridge. They carried rope and bits of wood and buckets full of sand.



Mia saw Tinker Bell flying past. “Hi, Tink. What’s going on?” she asked.

“The footbridge is out,” Tink replied. Now Mia saw that part of the bridge had collapsed into the stream. “We think Bingo must have smashed it when he was chasing fairies.”

“Oh no!” Bingo was Mia’s cat. The day before, he’d slipped through the fence into Never Land and caused trouble. “Can you fix it?”

“Yes, but it will take a lot of work,” Tink said happily. “I’d better get back.” She waved to Mia and flew off. Tink was always happiest when she had something to fix.

The fairies at the bridge all seemed busy, so Mia decided to go to the Home Tree. Perhaps she could find someone to talk to there.

In the pebbled courtyard, Mia saw sweeping-talent fairies tidying up. They waved to Mia, but kept on with their jobs. It was the same in the kitchen. When Mia peered through the tiny doorway, the cooking- and baking-talent fairies barely looked up.

“Busy day in Pixie Hollow,” said the baking fairy Dulcie as she rolled out pie dough. “Lots of hungry fairies to feed.”

Mia was disappointed. She’d hoped she might come upon a tea party or a game of fairy tag. But everyone in Pixie Hollow was hard at work. Mia wondered if she should help—after all, it was her cat that had caused the mess. But she knew she shouldn’t leave Gabby alone for too long. Time worked differently in Never Land, and Mia couldn’t be sure if a minute or an hour had gone by since she had left.

As Mia started back, she passed a tiny house made from a gourd that sat on one of the Home Tree’s lowest branches. She tapped on the little wooden door with her finger.

The garden fairy Rosetta opened the door. She was dressed in a glorious ruffled gown made from a pink carnation. “Mia!” Rosetta exclaimed. “I was hoping someone might drop by. I’m glad it’s you!”

“Are you going to a party?” Mia asked hopefully, eyeing Rosetta’s fancy dress.

Rosetta sighed sadly. “No parties today—not even a picnic. Everyone is too busy cleaning up after ... well, you know, what happened with Bingo.”

“Why aren’t you busy, too?” asked Mia.

“Well, Bingo made a great mess of almost everything, but he left all the flowers alone. There’s not much for a garden fairy to do. So I’ve been trying on dresses. Sometimes I do that when I’m feeling bored,” Rosetta admitted. “But now I’m out of dresses—I’ve tried on everything!”

Suddenly, Mia had an idea. It was such a good idea that she wondered why she hadn’t thought of it before. “Why don’t you come to my house? I have lots of dresses that would fit you perfectly,” she said, thinking of her doll clothes.

“You mean, go through the fig tree to the mainland? I don’t know.” Rosetta suddenly looked nervous. “Some fairies say it’s dangerous.”

Mia laughed. “It’s not dangerous. I just came through it! Rosetta, you have to come. I have a pink velvet dress that would look beautiful on you. Oh! And one made of blue lace. And a green one with a little matching bag...”

As Mia described the dresses, Rosetta’s blue eyes widened. At last, she burst out, “I’d love to see them all!”

“Come on. Let’s go right now,” said Mia.

With Rosetta flying beside her, Mia led the way back to the hollow tree. She was thrilled. This was the perfect answer to her problem. She could look after Gabby and still have fun!

But when they got to the tree, Rosetta hesitated. “Are you sure it’s safe?” she asked.

“You can ride in my pocket, if it makes you feel better,” Mia said.

Rosetta flew into Mia's pocket. Then Mia crawled into the hollow tree, and back to her own world.

About the Author

KIKI THORPE spent much of her childhood reading, daydreaming, and searching for fairies in the forests of Idaho—pastimes that were good training for writing children’s books. She is the author of several books for young readers, including the *New York Times* bestseller *In a Blink*, the first book in the Never Girls series. She lives with her husband, Greg, and their two children in San Francisco.

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